

# Courting controversy: Shakespeare's use of Ovid in *Venus and Adonis*

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Shakespeare was influenced by many sources, not purely classical ones, but it is often argued that Shakespeare's most significant stimulus was the Roman poet Ovid. Here George Ellis examines one particular episode, the tale of Venus and Adonis, which appears both in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in an extensive poem by Shakespeare. He argues that, in addition to picking up and re-moulding the literary model offered by Ovid, Shakespeare was also using this classical author to set himself apart from traditional fashions of writing and deliberately associate himself with the provocative, controversial, and scandalous reputation which comes with the name of Publius Ovidius Naso.

Literary works in pre-Elizabethan England frequently called upon Classical writers for inspiration, most commonly Virgil and Horace. But by Shakespeare's generation, Ovid's works had been introduced into grammar schools by Cardinal Wolsey, making him a fundamental part of the syllabus that Shakespeare would have studied at school and opening up another route for alluding to and using the Classical literary heritage. This is exactly what Shakespeare did in his long poem, *Venus and Adonis*, and in so doing he not only appropriated Ovid's literary model, but also played with elements of his racy reputation.

Ovid was a rogue; exiled from Rome on charges of writing a tasteless and immoral piece of poetry, the *Ars Amatoria*, which was regarded in the Renaissance as depraved and tasteless. By associating himself with Ovid, Shakespeare 'announced his intention to participate in some of the hottest poetic controversy of the 1590s'. Ovid's lewd reputation was not wholly deserved, but Shakespeare may have used it to his advantage, and crafted his writing around the popular Renaissance view of Ovid rather than the actual content of the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid's other works. In a sense, Shakespeare's capricious use of Ovid's image is itself a form of one-up-manship. Shakespeare is playing with the most playful of Latin poets and trying to beat him at his own game.

***Venus and Adonis:*  
a tale of unnatural lust**

Controversy aside, the most obvious debt to Ovid is Shakespeare's use of the story itself. Shakespeare does not concoct his own story from the start; rather, 'the classical text provides a narrative framework into which the Elizabethan writer inserts elaborate arguments'. Ovid's and Shakespeare's two stories are indeed alike. The character of Adonis is acknowledged to be of utmost beauty; Shakespeare says, through the mouth of Venus, that the mortal was 'thrice fairer' than the goddess herself, where the Ovidian version asserts that the goddess 'stayed away from heaven, preferring Adonis to the skies'. Both of these accounts give Adonis, in the eyes of Venus, great beauty; they also furnish the impression that Venus is in an unnatural state of obsession.

The intrinsic nature of the two stories differs, however, as they are being told through different media: Shakespeare's story is a straight narrative, while Ovid's version occurs as part of Orpheus' song which is itself part of the kaleidoscope which is the *carmen perpetuum* (continuous poem) of the *Metamorphoses*. In this instance it would have been difficult for Shakespeare's single narrative to remain wholly true to the original's complex *mise-en-abîme*. Fidelity has to give way to practicality, but in this trade-off Shakespeare has lost the ability to frame the story, as Ovid was able to, making full use of this capacity by interlinking related stories, embellishing the final piece.

**Bending gender:  
matching poem to patron**

Critics have argued that Shakespeare wished to create 'a story which serves to explain the perverse nature of sexual love'. Ovid's *Venus and Adonis* was ideal for this, as it centres on unnatural sexual desire, with Venus captive to Cupid's enchantment. Furthermore, the history behind the characters is beset with sexual irregularity: Myrrha, mother of Adonis, fell in love with her own father and entertained this lust; Aphrodite was forced to save Myrrha from her angered father, by turning her into the myrrh tree from which Adonis was subsequently born; one cannot dispute the irregularity of this family tree.

Furthermore, Shakespeare may have wanted to choose a mythological basis that would suit the man to whom the poem would be devoted. Before the poem commences, Shakespeare has written a dedication to the Earl of Southampton; one that, in the words of the writer Bill Bryson, 'can raise a sympathetic cringe even after four hundred years'. This Earl, The Right Honourable Henry Wriothesley, may have been remarkably suited to the myth of Venus and Adonis, or at least, Shakespeare's telling of it; like Adonis, he was not a classically masculine figure, perhaps even 'exceedingly effeminate', and, again like Adonis, he had turned down a woman for partnership, a certain Lady Elizabeth de Vere – two years before Shakespeare wrote his version of *Venus and Adonis*. It is almost certain that the Earl was bisexual as he had reported partners of both genders. Shakespeare may have decided that the best way to acquire the patronage of this wealthy Earl

was to create a piece that would appeal to his heart.

So Shakespeare had chosen a story, a framework, which he knew would suit his own intentions; the poet then adapts his telling to suit them further. In Ovid's original work, it is clear that Venus was besotted with Adonis: Cupid had 'grazed her breast with the tip of an arrow', but emotion is returned by Adonis. In the account by Shakespeare, Venus is portrayed as a sexual predator, and this direct relationship of predator to prey is made when Adonis is panting and we are told, 'she feedeth on the steam as on a prey': Venus is more of a Calypso seeking to possess her reluctant Odysseus, or even a Titania making love to a bemused Bottom. This Elizabethan telling of the story has been described by Beatriz Soubriet Velasco as a 'study of sexual role reversal', as the female is actively pursuing the male, where the inverse of this is typically true. Adonis plays the traditional part of the woman in this encounter; he is described as 'tender', which is conventionally a positive female portrayal, and when Venus tries to kiss him, 'he winks, and turns his lips the other way'. This evasion of sexual activity is habitual of females, who in Elizabethan times were expected to avoid any display of sexual desire.

This slant seems to take the surroundings from *Metamorphoses* 10, where Venus and Adonis appear, but the characters of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus from book 4. The latter of these characters was the duo-sexed child of Venus and Hermes, making this crossover of stories particularly apposite; and again, this ties in with Shakespeare's bisexual patron. In Shakespeare's poem, Venus takes the persona of Ovid's Salmacis, a vain and lust-driven nymph. In book 4, Salmacis' companions told her to 'interrupt her leisure for the chase', the 'chase' being metonymy for hunting; this sport was a common Renaissance sexual trope, also used by Shakespeare in *Titus Andronicus*, the rape of Lavinia being planned during a hunting party, drawing the link between the sexual chase and a literal animal hunt that is present in *Venus and Adonis*. In Shakespeare's story, Venus tries to persuade Adonis to abandon his plans of going hunting, reasoning that it is dangerous, linking Venus and Salmacis further.

The Adonis character in Shakespeare's poem resembles Ovid's portrayal of Narcissus. Shakespeare makes this latent connection palpable when he has Venus compare her desired mortal to the mythological figure. Narcissus was a hunter, eventually becoming a flower, and the name itself could have derived from a Greek word (*narke*) meaning 'numbness'; this ties in with the emotionally lifeless hunter and eventual anemone that Shakespeare presents as Adonis. This re-

characterization that Shakespeare performs on the story has effectively switched the genders. This certainly appears to be hugely different from the original by Ovid, but it is possible to argue otherwise; it is plausible that Ovid had deliberate gender-confusion in mind – in the tradition of (say) Catullus poem 63 or Virgil's *Caeneus* – but on a more subtle level, and Shakespeare has exaggerated it and played up to it, just as he did with the scandalous Renaissance image of Ovid. Once again we are presented with the mischievously appealing idea that Shakespeare is playing ball in Ovid's court, and trying to go a set up while there.

### Weaving flowery tales, telescoping time

In addition to using plot and characters from Ovid, Shakespeare also copies the Classical poet's techniques and styles. The layout of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is in the style of the *Metamorphoses*. The stories that compose the *Metamorphoses* are wound together 'in an endless variety of ways', and Shakespeare uses this approach himself, shrewdly inserting the story of Ares and Aphrodite (as expertly told in Homer's *Odyssey* 8) into his narrative as part of Venus' futile *suasoria* (persuasion) to her reluctant lover – or again alluding to the sick Narcissus to warn Adonis of the need to change his ways. This technique is typical of the *Metamorphoses*, where Ovid often changes smoothly between stories. This *modus operandi* is exploited by Shakespeare with the justification offered by Classical imitation. Much of the imagery found in Ovid is also echoed by Shakespeare. Shakespeare makes floral allusions throughout, which, in an Ovidian manner, foreshadow Adonis' eventual metamorphosis into an anemone. Shakespeare calls Adonis 'the field's chief flower', and compares the mortal to 'red...roses'.

There is one major difference in relation to the time frame, however. In Ovid's telling of the story, Venus appears to be a companion of Adonis, with him for long periods of time; Shakespeare, though, compacts the tale into a single episode. This reducing of the time scale removes the lengthy, patient persuasion that Venus tried to work on Adonis, and changes the story into a chase; no longer is there the quixotic pursuit, but a sexual hunt – a rape, effectively. This gives the writer scope for much more irony, as Shakespeare can play on the hypocrisy of Venus begging Adonis not to hunt when she is engaging in one herself; she is, essentially, hunting the hunter of Adonis, in the Renaissance sense of the word. She 'govern'd him in strength' and 'she murders with a kiss', suggesting that Venus is a predator, stalk-

ing her prey, which in this case is the 'coy' Adonis.

### Firing at Wriothesley with Ovid's ammunition

Making numerous changes to the original, Shakespeare has altered the essence of the poem to suit his own objectives. Shakespeare may have loathed the *passé* female victim, and to create controversy, as he did by choosing Ovid in the first place, he creates an antidote to the clichéd stories of male voracity in the face of female vulnerability.

Shakespeare had a target: Earl Henry Wriothesley. He also had a desire: controversy. Ovid's character, style, and poem itself was a seamless platform from which the Eliz-abethan writer has leaped, creating a poem which matches his every need, and which became a piece more successful than any of his other poems or plays. Shakespeare has used Ovid to the full in a multiplicity of ways; where he has changed the original, the adaptations reflect Shakespeare's own literary flair shining through and carrying forth what was a highly classical tale into the heart of the Renaissance.

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